

Shiism

FOUNDED: 632 C.E.

**RELIGION AS A PERCENTAGE OF
WORLD POPULATION:** 2.2 percent

OVERVIEW One of the two major branches of Islam, Shiism represents about 15 percent of the worldwide Muslim population. The initial split among Muslims occurred in Medina (western present-day Saudi Arabia) in 632 C.E. over the question of who would succeed the prophet Muhammad, but it took several decades before the division between the two branches, Shiism and Sunnism, became official. According to Shiites, the spiritual and temporal authority in the Muslim community rightfully belonged to Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and a succession of his descendants, known as the imams.

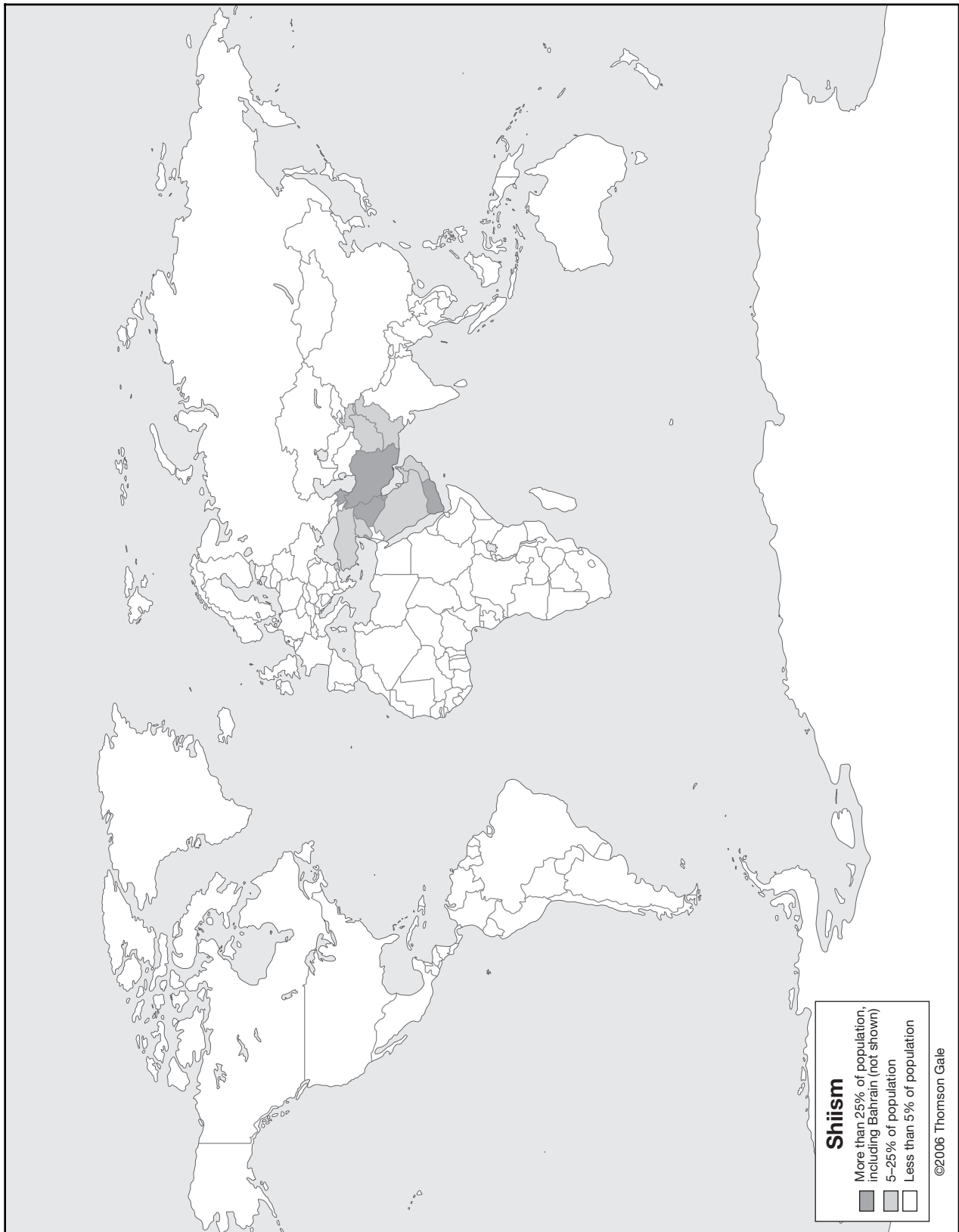
While Shiites live all over the world, they are most concentrated in Iran, where Shia Islam is the state religion. The majority of Iraq's population is also made up of Shiites. Other considerable Shiite communities live in Lebanon, Syria, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, East Africa, Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, and Pakistan.

Shiism consists of a number of major and minor subgroups. The most prevalent, representing about 80 percent of all Shiites, are the Twelvers (Shia Imamiyyah, or Ithna Ashariyyah), named after the number of imams the group recognizes; they are active mostly in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Other important groups with substantial followers are the Seveners, or Ismailiyah (likewise, a description reflecting the number of recognized imams),

active mostly in the Indian subcontinent and East Africa; and the Fivers, or Zaydiyah, found primarily in Yemen.

The Seveners divided from the Twelvers on the death of the sixth imam in 765 C.E., when they decided to recognize his son Ismail as the seventh imam (instead of another son, Musa al-Kazim, whom the Twelvers accept). The Fivers had seceded from the majority earlier (c. 720) when they recognized Zayd bin Ali as the fifth imam instead of his half brother Muhammad al-Baqir. Although these schisms grew out of theological, legal, and political differences, all Shiites share the fundamental belief that Ali and his descendants (through Fatima, Ali's wife and Muhammad's daughter) are the true successors of the Prophet. This entry focuses on the history and practices of the Twelvers, the dominant Shiite group.

HISTORY The formation of Shiism was a gradual process. During the decades immediately following the Prophet's death in 632 C.E., there emerged a number of religiopolitical dissent movements whose members expressed allegiance to Ali (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) and his sons (Muhammad's grandchildren) as the Prophet's true successors. These Muslims came to be known as the Shia (Arabic: "party" or "partisans") of Ali. The Shiite's claim of Ali's right to this succession was based on a number of events in which Muhammad showed special consideration for Ali. Shiites have understood these events as an indication of the Prophet's will to designate Ali as his successor and as his recognition of Ali's superior qualification for the role.





Shiite Muslims touch the tiled walls of the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala, Iraq. The shrines of the imams are considered holy and play important roles in Shiite religious life. © MICHAEL APPLETON/CORBIS.

The most notable of these events occurred at the oasis of Ghadir-e Khum, where the Prophet, in a sermon during his last hajj (pilgrimage), stated, “He of whom I am the *mawla*, Ali, also, is his *mawla*. O God, be the friend to those who befriend him and be the enemy of him who is his enemy, support those who support him and abandon those who abandon him.” There has been major disagreement between Shiites and Sunnis over how to interpret this passage. For Shiites the extraordinary manner in which the Prophet equated Ali in authority and affection with himself remains the strongest basis for their claim. They have taken the word *mawla* to mean leader, master, and guardian and thus see it as an explicit designation of Ali as his successor, whereas the Sunnis have interpreted *mawla* as friend and confidant.

After the Prophet’s death Ali did not immediately become caliph (successor of Muhammad and head of Islam); three other senior companions of the Prophet preceded him. Indeed, although Ali’s partisans held the view that he was the true successor of the Prophet, Ali did not contest the leadership of his predecessors, and he pledged allegiance to them in order to avoid dissension in the *ummah* (Islamic community). Ali finally became caliph in 656, but his reign lasted only until 661, when he was assassinated. None of Ali’s descendants ever formally assumed the office of caliph, for they were either imprisoned or killed by the Sunni authorities. In 681 C.E. the Umayyads (a Sunni dynasty) brutally suppressed an uprising in Karbala (central Iraq) of Ali’s son

Husayn; this inaugurated a long period of denying the rights of Ali’s descendants to the caliphate.

For most of their early history the Shiites lived as a persecuted Muslim minority scattered throughout the Islamic lands. In the tenth century C.E., however, the Shiites briefly gained political control of almost all the Muslim world, with each part ruled by one Shiite group or another. Notable among them were the Buyid dynasty (945–1055) in Iran, Iraq, and Syria and the Fatimid dynasty (909–1171), led by Sevener Shiites, in Egypt and North Africa. This Shiite domination was eventually brushed aside by Sunni Turks who established the Seljuq dynasty (eleventh–thirteenth centuries). In the sixteenth century the Safavids (1502–1736) adopted Twelver Shiism as the state religion of the Persian (Iranian) Empire. Since then Iran has remained the homeland of the majority of Shiite Muslims.

CENTRAL DOCTRINES There are three fundamental principles of belief that both Sunni and Shia Islam agree upon: *tawhid* (unity of God), *nubuwwah* (prophecy), and *maad* (resurrection). To these the Shia add two other principles: *imamah* (the imamate) and *adl* (justice of God). *Imamah* is the authority and leadership of the imams, who are regarded as the Prophet’s legitimate successors, inheriting his authority in both its spiritual and temporal dimensions. It is these inherited qualifications, particularly the spiritual one, that make the Shiite concept of imamate distinct from the Sunni concept of caliphate, which is essentially a temporal office. An imam may not assume the temporal leadership of the community—indeed, none except Ali did so—yet he remains exclusively the highest spiritual authority in the *ummah*, or Islamic community.

Imamah is the prerogative bequeathed by God to the Prophet’s family, who are known as *ahl al-bayt*, consisting of the Prophet, his daughter Fatima, his cousin Ali, Hasan and Husayn (children of Ali and Fatima), and certain of their descendants. Through divine inspiration each imam designates his successor during his lifetime. Embodied in this doctrine is the idea that an imam is a divinely inspired individual who possesses a special knowledge of religion (*ilm*), which includes both the explicit (*zahir*) and the esoteric (*batin*) meanings of the Koran. By virtue of possessing this special knowledge of religion, an imam continues one of the Prophet’s functions—*velayat* (guardianship). Shiism is clear, however, in its insistence that prophetic revelation ended with the prophet Muhammad.

The principle of *adl* was adopted by Shiites during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries C.E. Of the two contesting schools of theology, Ashari and Mutazilah, during that time, Shiism adopted the latter, which stressed free will and reason rather than predestination. As such, individuals are responsible for their own actions, which, on the Day of Judgment, will be evaluated by God according to his justice. *Maad* and the Last Judgment would be irrelevant if a person's actions were predetermined by God.

MORAL CODE OF CONDUCT Shiites strive to live a moral life, the guidelines of which are defined in the Shariah (Islamic law) and exemplified in the lives of the Prophet and the imams. An imam is understood to be the embodiment of spiritual transcendence, wisdom, rationality, and justice. Stories of the imam's commitment to social justice and moral uprightness are widespread among Shiites. Because free will exists, personal accountability and responsibility for one's actions are emphasized. It is everyone's duty to "command good and forbid wrong" in his or her community.

SACRED BOOKS The only sacred book accepted by both Sunnis and Shiites is the Koran. Yet each branch has its own collections of prophetic hadith (exemplary traditions). The four canonical Shiite collections, which also include the words of the imams, are *Kitab al-Kafi* by al-Kulayni (died in 939), *Man la Yahduruhu al-Faqih* by Ibn Babuyah (died in 991), and *Tabdhib al-Abkam* and *al-Istibsar*, both by Shaykh al-Tusi (died in 1067). The *Nahj al-Balaghah*, a collection of Imam Ali's sermons, is another distinctively Shiite text. The *Sabifah Sajjadiyyah*, a book of hymns and prayers attributed to the fourth imam, Imam Sajjad (659–712/13), is widely used by Shiites in their devotional prayers and rituals.

SACRED SYMBOLS Shiism has no sacred symbols. At some point during the period of the Abbasids—a pro-Shiite dynasty (750–1258) centered in Baghdad—the color green came to be recognized as representative of the Shiites. At the top of all major Shiite shrines is a green flag. The only exception is the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala, which flies a red flag to designate him as the chief martyr.

EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS Although all the imams are considered important to Shia Islam, there are three outstanding figures among them: Ali (c. 600–61),



Photographs of Shiite imams are sold in the streets of Baghdad, Iraq. The imam is the highest spiritual authority in the Islamic community. © ANTOINE GYORI/AGP/CORBIS.

the first imam and founder of Shiism; Husayn (626–80), the third imam and martyr of Karbala; and Jafar al-Sadiq (702–65), the sixth imam and founder of the Shiite school of law and theology. There are also two outstanding female figures, Fatima and Zeynab, who were, respectively, daughter and granddaughter of the Prophet, wife and daughter of Ali, and mother and sister of Husayn. They are venerated not only for having been members of the Prophet's family, or *ahl al-bayt*, but also because of their own personal merits and for being models of socially and politically conscious Muslim women.

Among notable twentieth-century figures in Twelver Shiism are Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (died in 1989), the leader of the Iranian Revolution in 1979; Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a political leader of Shiites in Iraq who was executed by Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s; and Imam Musa al-Sadr, a political leader of Shiites in Lebanon (he disappeared in 1979 and was allegedly kidnapped by Libyan secret police).

MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS Because the imams are considered the true authorities after the Prophet, their sayings and interpretations of religion were significant in the development of Shiite religious thought. As such, early scholarly efforts were directed toward collecting their sayings, called the hadith, and their formulations of Shiite law. The compilers of the four canonical collection of Shiite hadith (*al-Kutub al-arbaah*, or "The Four Books") are al-Kulayni (died in 939), Ibn Babuyah (died in 991), and Shaykh al-Tusi

(died in 1067). Shaykh al-Tusi (also known as Shaykh al-Taifah) and two other jurists, Shaykh al-Mufid (died in 1022) and Sayyid Murtada (died in 1044), are known for their fundamental contributions to Shiite theology, which was strongly influenced by the Mutazilah school of theology. They attempted to elaborate and systematize the principles of imamite theology and jurisprudence as set down by the fifth and sixth imams. Among later figures of philosophical theology are Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (died in 1274), known for his contributions in astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and theology; and his commentator, Allamah Hilli (died in 1325). Nasir al-Din's book *Tajrid al-itiqad* ("Plain Doctrines") is considered the beginning of systematic Shiite theology. A convergence between the mystical teachings of Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and Shiite theology led to a new trend of theosophy (theoretical mysticism) best manifested in *Jami al-Asrar* ("The Compilation of Secrets"), the monumental work of its leading figure, Sayyid Haydar al-Amuli (died after 1383 C.E.).

During later periods, and particularly under the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736) in Iran, Shiism experienced a remarkable revival of intellectual activity. While Islamic philosophy had ceased to flourish in other parts of the Islamic world, it reached its peak in Iran because of the philosophical "School of Esfahan." It was a creative synthesis of the Aristotelian-based philosophy of Ibn Sina (spelled Avicenna in English; 980–1037), the illuminationist theosophy of Suhrawardi (died in 1191), the mysticism of Ibn Arabi, and Shiite theology. The masters of this new metaphysics were Mir Damad (died in 1631), Mulla Sadra (died in 1640), Baha al-Din al-Amili (died in 1622), Mulla Muhsin Fayd al-Kashani (died in 1680), and Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji (died in 1661). Also emerging during the Safavid period was Allamah Majlisi (died in 1699), known for his voluminous hadith collection, *Bihar al-Anwar* ("Oceans of Lights"). Shiite jurisprudence received further elaboration by Wahid Bihbahani (died in 1790) and Murtada Ansari (died in 1864).

Notable Shiite interpreters of the Koran include al-Tabrisi (died in 1153), author of *Majma al-Bayan* ("Collection of Elucidations"); Mulla Muhsin Fayd al-Kashani, author of *Tafsir Safi* ("The Pure"); and the twentieth-century philosopher, mystic, and exegete Allamah Muhammad Hossein Tabatabai (died in 1980), author of *Tafsir al-Mizan* ("The Balance").

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE During their lifetimes the imams were the central authority in Shiite Islam. Twelver Shiites believe the twelfth and last imam has been in occultation (concealment) since 878 and will not return until the end of time. After the occultation Shiite jurists and traditionists (hadith specialists) came to be considered the imam's general deputies.

In the late eighteenth century, with the dominance of the Usuli school of jurisprudence over the Akhbari school, a leadership position called the *marja al-taqlid* (source of emulation) was established. In each generation there have been only a few senior jurists recognized by public consensus—on the basis of their knowledge and impeccable piety—as *marja*, the highest religious authority. The opinions and verdicts of a *marja* are binding upon his followers, who send religious taxes and donations to him.

At the lowest rank of the clerical hierarchy are the seminary students, *tullab*, who receive study stipends from the *marja* of their choice. In between are *mujtabids*, graduates of seminaries whose main function is to lead prayers in mosques and to resolve day-to-day religious problems.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES Shiites, like Sunnis, perform daily prayers in a mosque, which, in addition to being a holy place, usually serves as the local center of religious activities in each community. Besides Mecca and Medina—the two most sacred places for all Muslims—the shrines of the imams are also considered holy and play important roles in Shiite religious life as both sites of pilgrimage and centers of religious learning. The most important of these sites are located in Iraq (the shrines of Imam Ali in Najaf, of Imam Husayn in Karbala, of the fifth and ninth imams in Kazemayn, and of the tenth and eleventh imams in Samarra), Iran (the shrines of the eighth imam [Ali al-Rida] in Mashhad and of his sister [Masumah] in Qum), and Syria (the shrine of Sayyidah Zeynab, the sister of Imam Husayn, outside of Damascus).

WHAT IS SACRED? The Koran is regarded as the only sacred object by Shiite Muslims. Highly respected among Shiites as a kind of relic is *turbat-e Imam Husayn*, or *turbat-e Karbala* (dust or baked mud from the earth of Karbala, where Imam Husayn and other martyrs fell). This dust, which has a pleasant and soothing scent, is believed to carry the blessings of the imam and is used in some popular and devotional religious practices, particularly in birth and death rituals.

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS Shiite holidays and festivals may be divided into two categories: celebrations and occasions of mourning. In the first category, Shiites share with Sunni Muslims the celebration of the two major feasts of Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha. In addition, they also celebrate an exclusively Shiite feast called Id al-Ghadir, which falls eight days after Id al-Adha and celebrates the Prophet's designation of Ali as his successor at Ghadir-i Khum.

Moreover, the birth of the Prophet (also recognized by Sunnis) and those of the imams are celebrated. Although not all these birthdays are recognized as major holidays, and few of them are publicly celebrated, the births of the Prophet and Ali, Husayn, and Mahdi (the first, second, and twelfth imams, respectively) are widely observed. During these holidays there are festive gatherings of families and friends, public distribution of sweets and special meals, and visits to elderly relatives. Because blessings are attributed to these days, people may perform special prayers or even fast. In public gatherings speakers usually recite poetry praising the imam being honored, after which the crowd may chant one or two phrases.

Commemoration of the deaths of the Prophet and the imams constitutes the second set of Shiite holidays. Mourning ceremonies for the Prophet, Ali, Fatima, and Husayn are the main public events observed by all Shiites. On these occasions devout Shiites wear black clothing and participate in public ceremonies, which are held in almost every neighborhood by devout families or local religious organizations and mosques.

The suppression of Shiites in Karbala and the martyrdom of Husayn are commemorated every year during the month of Muharram. Shiite mourning ceremonies culminate on the tenth day, Ashura, which corresponds to the day in 681 C.E. when Imam Husayn and his 72 companions and family members were massacred by the army of Yazid, the Umayyad caliph. Muharram ceremonies include the *Rawda Khani*, a recitation by a cleric of the martyr's sufferings. At the high point of these meetings the audience weeps and publicly laments the losses of Karbala. Another distinctive feature of the Muharram commemorations is the street processions, which often attract large crowds (mostly men) marching in rows through the streets from one place of ceremony to another, chanting eulogies to the martyred imam while beating their chests rhythmically. Some strike their shoulders with chains, while in various parts of the Shiite world there are devotees who even strike their heads

The Love for *ahl al-bayt*

At the heart of Shiite teachings is love for the *ahl al-bayt*, or holy family, consisting of the prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his cousin Ali (who married Fatima), and Hasan and Husayn (children of Fatima and Ali). For Twelvers, the dominant Shiite group, *ahl al-bayt* comprises "the Fourteen Infallibles"—namely, the Prophet, Fatima, and the twelve imams (or successors of the Prophet, including Ali, the first imam). Below is a chronological list of the imams, who were born between the seventh and ninth century C.E.

Ali ibn Abi Talib

Hasan ibn Ali

Husayn ibn Ali

Ali ibn al-Husayn

Muhammad al-Baqir

Jafar al-Sadiq

Musa al-Kazim

Ali al-Rida

Muhammad al-Taqi

Ali al-Naqi

Hassan al-Askari

Muhammad al-Mahdi (the Awaited Imam)

The twelfth imam, Mahdi (the Rightly Guided One), disappeared in 878 C.E. According to the Twelver Shiites, Mahdi is still alive and in occultation (concealment). While hidden from ordinary eyes, he takes a hand in world affairs by guiding current spiritual leaders and his qualified followers. It is believed that his return at the end of the time will usher in an era of ultimate peace and justice on earth.

with swords (a popular act usually not authorized by religious authorities). This self-flagellation is a symbolic act indicating regret that they could not be present in Karbala to help the imam and his innocent family; it is also a means of sharing their suffering.

Muharram commemoration ceremonies, known by various names in different countries (*Rawda* in Iran, *Majlis* in India, and *Quarry* in Iraq), are often followed by public distribution of meals and sweet drinks in remembrance of the hunger and thirst that Husayn and his family suffered in Karbala. This is customary among Shiite families and is often done in fulfillment of a vow. Also part of the ceremonies is the *Taziyah*, a theatrical reenactment of the Karbala tragedy (referred to by some as the Shiite passion play), which began in Iran under the Safavids and continues to be performed in some parts of Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.

MODE OF DRESS No specific mode of dress is adopted by ordinary Shiites. Shiite clergy are distinguished from laypersons by their professional dress, which consists of a long gown (*aba*) and a turban (*ammamah*). The color of the turban, black or white, indicates whether the person is a sayyid. The sayyids (who wear black turbans) claim genealogical ties to one of the descendants of the Prophet.

DIETARY PRACTICES The Shiite school of law confirms the dietary regulations prescribed in the Koran and elaborated in the Shariah. As such, it does not differ from the four Sunni schools of law on what types of food are *halal* (permissible) or *haram* (forbidden). Drinking water, however, has special meaning for a devout Shiite: It reminds him or her of the suffering of Imam Husayn and his companions, who were denied access to water for some days prior to their massacre in Karbala. Shiites teach their children from an early age that before drinking water they should say, "May I drink in remembrance of Husayn."

RITUALS Twelver Shiism shares with Sunni Islam the fundamental rituals of daily prayer, fasting in the month of Ramadan, hajj (pilgrimage), and payment of *zakat*. There are, however, minor differences in the performance of prayers. Although the times of day, number of prayer units (*rakab*), prayer content, and postures are the same, Shiites usually, but not necessarily, shorten the waiting time (one to two hours among Sunnis) between the noon and afternoon prayers by saying them a few minutes apart. The waiting time is similarly shortened between the evening and night prayers. The Shiite call to prayer (*adhan*), moreover, states Ali's name following that of the Prophet. Shiites refrain from crossing their hands over their chests or abdomens during prayer, and

they insist that during the prostration phase the forehead should be placed on nonanimal, natural objects, mostly dust, stone, or the earth. Out of practicality small blocks of baked mud, called *mubr*, are used, preferably made from *turbat-e Karbala* (dust from the earth of Karbala).

Shiites are also required to pay *khums*, a tax that amounts to one-fifth of their total annual savings and of any net increase in their property. This practice is mentioned in the Koran and was performed during the Prophet's time. *Khums*, *zakat*, and other religious donations are paid to a *marja al-taqlid* (who functions as a representative of the hidden twelfth imam) and are used for helping the needy and for establishing and maintaining mosques and religious education centers.

There are no fundamental differences in burial rites between Shiites and Sunnis. Shiites observe a longer period of mourning and hold special ceremonies on the third, seventh, and fortieth days following a death, as well as on the anniversary. They also often visit the tombs of their deceased relatives, whose burial markers, engraved with biographical information, are kept in good condition for many generations.

rites of passage There are no distinctive Shiite rites of passage.

MEMBERSHIP In its early phase the Shiite population grew naturally, as some members of the *ummah*, or Islamic community, chose to join the followers of Ali or other imams. Even in its later phase, when Twelver Shiism developed its own organizational structure, there was no office with the specific task of missionary activities. Nevertheless, Shiism has always been open to accepting new members, and there have been some Shiite clergy and mosques involved in proselytizing.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE Generally speaking, the Shariah (Islamic law), which is based on the Koran, is tolerant of People of the Book—Jews, Christians, and other religious minorities that possess divine scriptures and have received revelations from God. Excluded is any religious tradition that proclaims a prophecy after Muhammad. For this reason the Bahai tradition, which developed from an offshoot of nineteenth-century Shiite thought (Babism) and claims to offer a new prophecy, has not been tolerated in Iran, where Shiism is the state religion. As a minority, Shiites themselves have been

Seveners and Fivers

A minority of Shiites, about 20 percent, are members of the Sevens (Ismailiyah) or Fivers (Zaydiyyah) subgroups. Their political histories, theologies, and religious practices are radically different from those of the Twelvers (Ithna Ashariyyah), who represent the remaining 80 percent of Shiites. These groups formed over disagreements about the selection of an imam, or successor to the prophet Muhammad.

The Fivers, or Zaydiyyah, were founded in 720 c.e. when Zayd, a grandson of Husayn (the third imam), rebelled against the Sunni leader of the Umayyad empire. Zayd's followers recognized him as the fifth imam (thus the name Fivers), unlike other Shiites, who believed the imam was Zayd's half brother Muhammad al-Baqir. According to the Fivers, now mostly in Yemen, the rightful imam may be any descendent of Husayn (son of the Shiite founder, Ali) who establishes himself through an armed rebellion. This view is reflected in their tendency to be more politically active—and, during their formative years, militant—compared with other Shiites.

When the sixth imam died in 765 c.e., most of his followers accepted his son Musa al-Kazim as the seventh imam, but a minority recognized his eldest son, Ismail, instead. Since then the latter have followed a succession of imams who descend from Ismail. Ismaili Shiites are referred to as Seveners because they disagree with Twelver Shiism over the selection of the seventh imam.

At the end of the eleventh century another dispute over succession caused the Seveners to subdivide into the Nizari and the Mustali factions. The Nizaris are now known as the Khojas and live primarily in Pakistan, India, Iran, Yemen, and East Africa; their spiritual leader is called the Aga Khan. The Mustalis are now known as Bohras, and the majority live in the state of Gujarat in India.

Seveners follow few traditional Muslim practices. For instance, instead of mosques, they have *jama'at khanahs* ("gathering houses"). They follow the Five Pillars of Islam, but the interpretation of these, and of the Koran, may be changed by the reigning imam. This is because they emphasize a highly esoteric and symbolic meaning of both the scripture and the acts of worship. For Ismailis, hajj (pilgrimage) is fulfilled not by a trip to Mecca but rather by seeing the imam.

subject to persecutions and prejudices to varying degrees throughout their history.

SOCIAL JUSTICE Shia Islam has from its inception been concerned with social justice and has upheld the egalitarian spirit of the Koran and the Prophet. Indeed, it was over the issue of social justice that many of the Prophet's prominent companions and other members of the *ummah* turned to Ali. Ali's concern for social equality and his reign as caliph set the example for *adl wa qist* (justice and fairness) for both Sunni and Shiite Muslims. In Islamic, and particularly Shiite, literature, Ali's name is invariably associated with justice. *Khums*, the obligatory religious tax for Shiites, indicates an institutionalized concern for maintaining social and economic justice. In addition to discussing the Prophet's exemplary treatment of the poor and downtrodden, Shiite ethical texts include numerous examples from Ali's life, which was devoted to the cause of the poor, orphans, widows, and

other disadvantaged groups. Ali symbolizes contentment, rejection of material attachment, and standing for the cause of justice.

In addition to *khums*, *zakat*, and general charities, Shiites also donate money to the shrines of different imams, which have large endowments and charity organizations.

SOCIAL ASPECTS Family constitutes the core unit of Shiite society and the foundation of its religious life. The laws on marriage and divorce are fundamentally the same among Twelver Shiites and Sunnis, as both ground their rules on the Koran and the Shariah. There is, however, one major exception: The Shiite school of law allows, yet strictly regulates, temporary marriage (*mutab*), in which a duration, such as a day, a month, or three years, is chosen for the marriage. This practice was permitted at the time of the Prophet and his first successor, Abu Bakr. It was prohibited by the second caliph, Umar, and then it was restored by Ali, the fourth caliph.

Divorce in Shiite law is generally more difficult. Distinct from the Sunni schools, the statement of the divorce formula should be made explicitly and in the presence of two witnesses. It is not acceptable if made in a state of intoxication or anger. Also, Shiite law does not allow innovated divorce (*talaq al-bid'ah*), in which three pronouncements of divorce (rendering it irrevocable) are made on a single occasion.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES Like Sunni Islam, Shiism is opposed to abortion and homosexuality. Abortion is permitted only if the mother's life is at risk, though some jurists allow it before the "ensoulment" period (before the soul enters the fetus, occurring 120 days after conception). The majority of Shiite jurists permit the use of contraceptives, and family planning and population control programs (which promote contraceptives and other methods) are not considered religiously unlawful. Such programs are permitted even in Iran under the Islamic regime, which is in the hands of Shiite jurists.

CULTURAL IMPACT The twelve imams provide models for both the temporal and spiritual domains of life. Shiite literature is replete with stories about the imam's patience, wisdom, piety, self-sacrifice, and resistance to injustice. In Twelver Shiism there is a messianic expectation that the twelfth imam, Mahdi, will come out of his concealment and bring ultimate peace and justice to the world. A special genre of Shiite poetry in celebration of Mahdi's virtues reflects the depth of yearning for his return.

Although Shiites, like Sunnis, insist that there is no intermediary between God and humankind, it is a common Shiite practice to appeal to the imams, as *walis* (divine guardians), for spiritual or even temporal aid. The Shiite perception of Ali as a supreme *wali* is reflected in popular Shiite paintings that portray him sitting in a powerful posture yet with a majestic simplicity. Although Muslims are not supposed to portray any religious figure, it is possible to find such pictures of Ali

in the houses of devotees who want to visualize the subject of their love. Such pictures, however, are not used as objects of worship.

The suppression of Shiites in Karbala has had a notable impact on all aspects of Shiite life and culture. The artistic expressions and imagination of Shiites are inextricably inspired by the themes of this event. *Musibat*, a genre of religious epic that narrates the events of Karbala, occupies a prominent place in Shiite literature. Themes of martyrdom, heroism, the suffering of the oppressed, and messianism are commonly used in paintings and the performing arts. The *Taziyah*, a reenactment of the Karbala tragedy, has served as the precursor of modern theater among Shiite Muslims.

Forough Jahanbakhsh

See Also Vol. I: *Islam*

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